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# Reworking The White-Masculine Ideal

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Reworking The White-Masculine Ideal

by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art  
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## ABSTRACT

This text functions as an exploration of self through artistic practice, a designated space for reflection on contemporary Queer experience. In looking specifically at the permeation of the idealized-white-masculine figure as found within Western visual culture, social media and gay pornography become isolated as sites where these figures are commonly found. This line of inquiry defines how the ideal is reified through these differing digital platforms and the social implications the homogenized male form has on raced individuals. In addition to determining the image of the perfect masculine physique through research, this text expands on how its' imaged representation becomes material that supports a multidisciplinary practice. The result of such endeavors is layered collage works as well as performative video works that are each grounded in relevant research centered on sexuality, marginalized identities, and media studies. This theoretical contextualization hinges primarily on texts such as Jose Esteban Munoz's *Disidentifications*, Hito Stereyl's *A Thing Like You and Me*, and Guy Snaith's essay, *Tom's Men: The Masculinization of Homosexuality and the Homosexualization of Masculinity at the End of the Twentieth Century*. The works discussed in this thesis function as a disruption of idealized masculinity and reworking it into an art object that lends itself to the visibility of othered makers.

## INTRODUCTION

In a moment of leisure, I look to find something to entertain and stimulate me.

Instinctively, I pull a simple rectangular device from within the pocket of my black denim jeans and awaken it from its temporary slumber. This device, a cybernetic extension of myself known as a smartphone, possesses all of the materials and applications necessary for me to exist in modern society. Where would I be if I were unable to instantly summon the means to jot down an essential thought within my Notes application? Would I ever be able to recall that thought if I failed to place it within this designated digital space? Where would I be if I were unable to instantly communicate with my lover a quick "thinking of you" or "miss you" text message at a moment's notice the instant I experience the feeling? It is through this cybernetic extension a notion of immediacy, access, and visibility is highly valued. It is through the smartphone as well that I'm able to access the broader world around me through visual and verbal communication primarily facilitated via social media.

Platforms like Instagram inform how I understand what surrounds me and places me equally in the role of consumer and producer. On Instagram, a variety of images populate my feed. Content ranging from mundane family vacation photographs to extravagant celebrity photo-ops are all within reach. What calls my attention most easily on my feed however are images of the eroticized male form. I continuously scroll rapid fire in a downward motion. Image after image is a beefy man documenting his reflection. Gazing upon the bodies of these men I lust after their hard pecs and pronounced firm stomachs. Their arms easily double or triple the

size of my own and beneath their gym shorts is a titillating suggestion of their half hard dick bulging out for my attention. (Fig. 1)



**Figure 1.** Found Instagram post relating to the ideal.2019

It is during this act of looking I pause to question myself on why are these the men I perceive as the ideal and how would I define it? Is it the result of the proliferation of the muscled white male as an icon in almost all media I consume? I find these men frequently represented in mainstream television, film, pornography, social media, and art. The iconography of the

hyper-masculine-white ideal is inescapable and has led me to reflect on how such iconography has aided in defining my sexual identity as well as self-image. Gay culture in my experience is depicted mainly from an attractive white male perspective. From the corporate offices of Brian Kenney on *Queer as Folk* to Ennis Del Mar spitting in his hand on *Brokeback Mountain*, pornography takes these same experiences and adopt them as erotic fantasies. This reflection occurs during the process of making within my multidisciplinary art practice. Throughout the remainder of this text, I will discuss more in-depth how I define and address the ideal as well as its' relationship to my identity. I' am more specifically looking at Instagram and pornography as the primary channels in which I engage the ideal daily as these are the sources whose images I appropriate most often into my work so far. The ideal as conveyed through images or these object "things" that reside within a digital space are products of a western ideology that communicates specific white male beauty as the standard.

## COLLAGE

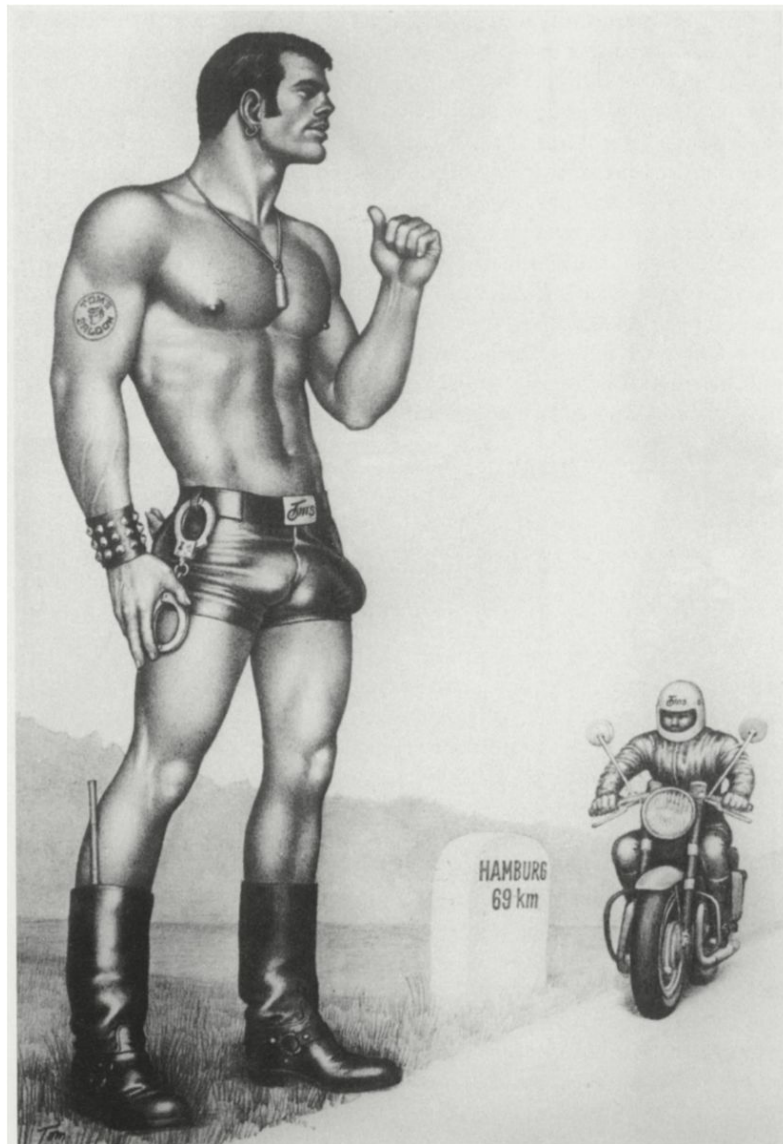
My current artistic practice began to take shape early on through a series of collage works that look towards defining the visual representations of ideal masculine bodies that surround me. In identifying the model, I looked towards myself and saw a body dissimilar; I saw the other. Within the fantastical realm of pornography, I see myself depicted in a fetishistic and exotified light (see figure bilatinmen or similar). To illustrate how this fetishistic gaze functions it is necessary to offer my physical statistics; I 'am a 295 lb, 5'9" tall, and of Mexican descent. When considering physique, an individual of my physicality is often quickly compartmentalized within the Bear subculture of the gay community.<sup>1</sup> In pornography, these men often assume the role of authority, portraying a police officer or father figure. While there is a level of desirability placed on men who fit the bear physique it does have its limitations on who accurately can still be qualified as a Bear. For some individuals, a Bear is a man who is fit and large purely from bodybuilding or some other physically intensive activity — essentially possessing an idolized sculpted figure with more body hair to reinforce signals of masculinity. For others, a Bear is a representation of body positivity in the gay community, a man unafraid to embrace his chubbiness. As I perceive it, the definition of a bear is often tied to the former, and not the latter.

Initially, I sourced the images for my collages solely from Instagram. The photos came from physically athletic men heavily immersed in gym culture; likely hawking their self-made fitness programs, OnlyFans.com page, or an inspirational quote. The feed of their Instagram's contains "thirst trap" images or images that function in such a way to entice the viewer to gaze

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<sup>1</sup> Bear is a gay slang term. It describes a hairy, heavy-set (sometimes muscular) gay or bisexual man. A bear typically projects an image of rugged masculinity.

upon them sexually and impulsively follow them or interact with their posts through likes and comments. The key characteristics I look for in a found figure on Instagram is a figure that is reminiscent of the fantastical physiques depicted in Tom of Finland illustrations (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Tom of Finland, *Hitchhiker*, 1976.



The typical Tom of Finland man found in the artist's illustrations is a hyper-masculine figure that represents the epitome of masculinity and macho swagger. The chests of these men are massive mounds that are drawn to glisten and gleam, as if thoroughly oiled, under the viewers gaze.

These men, when clothed, are usually dressed in denim or leather, nearly bursting at the seams, the arms and legs of these men are also so large they're seemingly testing the limitations of their clothing. Most seductive perhaps are their engorged phalluses that bulge beneath those typified denim or leather trousers. These figures have played a significant role in Queer history as icons for a gay sexual liberation that subverted notions of Queers being solely viewed pejoratively as effeminate or "sissies."<sup>2</sup> However, today queer iconography such as Tom of Finland's comics, wherein masculinity is now established as a fetish object that is exaggerated and overdetermined, function as the desirable standard in gay communities.<sup>3</sup>

Upon identifying a figure online that resembles Tom's men, possessing the exaggerated form Mercer speaks of, I save and store the image within an archived collection on Instagram. In considering these bodies as a prototype as Mercer defines it,<sup>4</sup> I question how the representation of the prototype through digital media can be remediated and utilized as material to express my frustration with the homogenized male body. I see the image as merely a material whose representation is malleable, and I look towards Hito Stereys' essays on the image as object and cultural iconography. Stereyl recalls an instance where a film by Humphrey Jennings could not screen because the appropriate technology, determined as the ideal approach to best screen the

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Snaith, "Tom's Men: The Masculinization of Homosexuality and the Homosexualization of Masculinity at the End of the Twentieth Century." *Paragraph* 26, no. 1/2 (2003). 84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43263715>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 86

<sup>4</sup> John Mercer. "Homosexual Prototypes: Repetition and the Construction of the Generic in the iconography of Gay Pornography." *Paragraph* 26, no. 1/2 (2003): 283. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43263730>.

film, was unavailable.<sup>5</sup> At the conference Stereyl attended, Jennings work was intended to screen through the use of a film projector and not a DVD player and readily available video projector. The emphasis placed on the use of a film projector indicates some devaluing of its perceived counterpart-the commercial image that is widely accessible through mass production. Considering this importance placed on the aestheticized image and the refusal to accept the poor image, I liken raced subjects as the poor image, the refuted image, and the aesthetically well-formed body to the materiality of the “perfect” film. I wanted to process the aestheticized image by reworking it into a “poor image” that reflects my subjectivity as an othered body who has been affected by specific ideologies of Queer beauty. Poverty induced images become generated by utilizing technology such as a printer and scanner intended to produce a quality image to now functioning as a tool to degrade it, allowing me to direct the image to fail.

Referring to Mercer's text again in which the ideal becomes defined as being synonymous with the prototype, I further consider how the consumption of the image of the “prototype” occurs and the way it becomes duplicated over and over. The image of hyper-masculine physicality, like a photographic print, is versioned continuously by those in the gay community who strive to come towards achieving the prototypical or physically perfect. In looking at the image itself as a surrogate for the thing it represents, I sought out to disrupt it. Initially, in my collage practice, I process the culled Instagram images through analog generation loss utilizing a commercial office scanner and printer. By scanning and printing the image over and over, each version of the image being used to generate the next, the image begins to deteriorate. The loss of resolution that begins to occur and the various elements that contribute to the perfect image or

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<sup>5</sup> Hito Stereyl. "In Defense of the Poor Image." E-flux. November 2009. Accessed April 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

print unravels. With each generation of the printed copy, colors start to become dull and muddy in a way that the image moves away from an accurate representation. The noise and pixelation of the image become increasingly more severe as well as it is reinterpreted through versioning (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Process image - versioned photograph

To further advance this line of inquiry I would then consider Stereyl's "A Thing Like You And Me." Stereyl uses the image of David Bowie as an iconographic image to convey how despite the way likeness may be depicted, representation of Bowie remains.<sup>6</sup> The image of Bowie arrested in time any connotations of who he truly is, and the accumulated layers of meaning society hold become attributed to him. It is from this viewpoint the image of Bowie becomes an iconic thing much like Tom of Finland's illustrations of men, once existing as a radical alternative to gay sexual identity, and now upholding a standard of male beauty.<sup>7</sup> With these thoughts in mind, I begin to seek out how I could appropriate the ideal body and rework it by actively participating with it.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the noise of the image highlights from this act of generation loss, but it is initially introduced early on since the image originates from a cropped screenshot. After I have generated multiple versions of the same image, I take the most affected and manipulate it further through slit-scanning, a technology in which perceived failure to render accurately becomes emphasized, and the original image becomes something more.

Metaphorically, the waves and ripples introduced to the image through this process bring to mind a vision of Narcissus gazing at himself in a pond. Narcissus looked into still waters as it acted as a mirror. If the calm waters' moved, rippled, and waved then Narcissus would be unable to luxuriate in his beauty. This possible interruption of beauty, of perfection, is made possible by working in tandem with the technology of the scanner and the idealized representational image.

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<sup>6</sup> Hito Stereyl. "A Thing Like You and Me." E-flux. August 2010. Accessed May 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Snaith, "Tom's Men: The Masculinization of Homosexuality and the Homosexualization of Masculinity at the End of the Twentieth Century." *Paragraph* 26, no. 1/2 (2003). 84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43263715>.

<sup>8</sup> Hito Stereyl. "A Thing Like You and Me." E-flux. August 2010. Accessed May 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>

By directly guiding the image to fail at being perfect and forcing it to be challenging to read, I insert my subjectivity by actively reworking the image.<sup>9</sup> I layer versioned, and slit-scanned images on top of each other and further degrade them through physical actions of ripping, tearing, and wrinkling them. I use tape and staples as readily accessible studio materials I can use to obscure the image or reenact violence back towards the representational image. The collage materials are finally constructed on letter-sized sheets of paper, scanned and scaled up to large inkjet prints which solidify the different collage components into one consumable image. (Fig. 4)



**Figure 4.** Steven Hector Gonzalez, *Fruits of Sean Cody*, Archival Inkjet Print, 32"x44" 2019

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<sup>9</sup> Hito Stereol. "A Thing Like You and Me." E-flux. August 2010. Accessed May 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>

In my participation with the iconographic-image, I consider how my practice works within Jose Esteban Munoz theory on disidentification. Disidentification is a theory of marginalized, raced subjects developing a performative political stance towards dominant ideology. Building off of Althusser's work on interpellation and then Michel Pecheux, Munoz establishes the three political strategies as it relates to Queer subjects of color and their options in navigating a society that privileges whiteness. Identification or Assimilation is when the subject chooses to identify with ideological forms and operate within its structure completely. Counter Identification or Resistance is when the subject rejects or resists an ideology. This strategy runs into some problems in that in being situated in direct opposition to whiteness and the idealized male physique in this instance, that oppressive structure becomes validated as its status of being dominant is acknowledged. Disidentification neither assimilates to dominant ideology nor resists it. It works "on and against it" or attempts to rework the ingrained problematic ideology from within.<sup>10</sup>

With these strategies, I look at my process as employing the disidentificatory tactic - valuing resistance but also acknowledging the power of dominant ideology as it exists through iconic images residing in gay visual culture and attempting to create a shift within that framework by creating works of art. In creating remediated images that will locate itself within the discourse of contemporary art - what tactics can I use to further the discussion of marginalized others as a desirable subject? The collages don't entirely function as outright resistance but as disruption or intervention of representation. By using the language of art and presenting queer work within the white cube, I hope to use disidentification as a tactic to

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<sup>10</sup> Jose Esteban Munoz. *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 11

infiltrate white and heteronormative art spaces to make my underrepresented identity and sexuality visible. I have experimented extensively with this strategy in many ways, some of which includes a self-curated two-person exhibition I had with a queer woman of color unpacking similar notions of identity as well as my reimagining of a gay bathhouse Gloryhole through a performance. Munoz exemplifies disidentification in his study of the drag terrorist Vaginal Davis. Davis, a performer who aggressively interrogates marginalized subjects position within systems of power, speaks of a "snow period" in their life where they maintained a romantic relationship with a white man. This "snow period" is framed both by Davis and Munoz as an assimilationist tactic (footnote Munoz) to garner certain white privileges by proxy of the established relationship. In keeping with the usage of the term "snow" to function as a stand-in for the broader idea of white privilege, Munoz describes the snow (white privilege) as something that would inevitably disintegrate and melt in the hands of the marginalized subject. I feel the usage of the term "snow" could apply to a viewpoint of the white cube functioning as a white partner. The white cube offers by proxy a degree of visibility to myself which acts a platform that I can utilize as an opportunity to garner larger audiences to address issues centered on Queerness.



## VIDEO/PERFORMANCE



**Figure 5.** Steven Hector Gonzalez, *Where The Boys Are*, single-channel video, 2019

I expand on my investigation of idealized masculinity and male beauty by considering my relationship with gay pornography. Pornography is a primary source of inspiration, adolescent sexual education, and continual gratification which I look toward as a significant form of media that informs my identity. Porn is a site for sexual desire to be freely expressed through erotic fantasy. In my video performance piece, *Where The Boys Are* (Figure 5), I project a gay 90's pornographic video found on PornHub onto my exposed body while I lip-sync Connie Francis' "Where The Boys Are." The projected video depicts a group of white men engaging in an orgy scene taking place in a locker room. It is after they have removed their athletic gear and



have begun hardcore penetrative sex that I occupy the center of the action and perform for the camera. This video performance refers to a longing for inclusion and idealization where it will not become realized. In a fantasy where all bodies could be present, the projected orgy caters to the imagination that privileges the white jock where no men of color are allowed.

By performing simultaneously with the projections, I aim to interrupt the viewer's experience of porn. The video wraps around my body as I shift through the frame of the video, warping and distorting the clarity of the image. As I move towards and away from the lens, the projection hugs my body and takes on the tone of my brown skin. My body image negotiates having to pull away from the image and receding into it - I am rendered visible and invisible, obscured and illuminated by the image simultaneously.<sup>11</sup> This spatial relationship with the image, as well as the performance that occurs within it, parallels the tension I possess within myself. This tension can be found in how I passively and consensually consume the idealized body through media, yet feel it necessary to analyze it critically. I struggle with the want to assimilate, to be similarly valued as the determined ideal, meanwhile negotiating my own identity and the implications my body has when the gay white gaze consumes it. When my body is gazed upon by the white viewer, I'm immediately categorized within Bear subculture and as the fetishized Latino.

In my diaristic video essay, untitled (reflections), I position myself as a desirable object and direct myself as a sexual commodity on my terms. The first half of the video consists of close-up shots of my body on a hotel bed as I caress it, lathering myself up in baby oil almost to excess, highlighting the masculine physicality of the body much like Tom of Finland's illustrated

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<sup>11</sup> Munoz, Jose Esteban. *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 169

men. My intent for this work is not only to attract the viewer's gaze but also to function as a mirrored image that situates myself similar to the sexual ideal, an iconographic figure. In addition to this visual, there is audio of myself recalling my first sexual encounter with another man. This diaristic recollection through audio is used as material to lend subjectivity back to my precariously positioned object-body on the screen. Precarity is present by myself presenting my body as a consumable image for an audience while also sharing with them experiences that expand on my personhood. This approach is vital to me because too often the experiences lived by individuals of color are overlooked and not positioned at the forefront of what a general gay experience can be. The next half of the video is more diaristic audio of my relationship with nightlife while recorded footage of various nightlife scenes lingers on the screen. In this portion, I discuss longing and belonging, in theme with many of my other works. Nightlife has primarily functioned as a site for play, self-exploration, and community. It is through the gay club scene, which can be likened to a rite of passage for some, that I began centering myself on what exactly it means to be queer or gay, and how I fit within that framework. Utilizing personal history, voice, and my body as material I straddle the line between object and subject. I want to be seen not merely as a stereotype or fetish object but as a complex individual with conflicting desires and needs.

Through gay porn, I initially formed my relationship with the bodies I now identify as the prototypical hyper-masculine ideal. For many Queer men like myself, I stumbled upon pornography in my adolescence when I was developing my sexual identity and coming to terms with my queerness. For many of us, the men I saw in gay porn resembled the men I secretly lusted after on the packaging of men's underwear as a child. Becoming immersed in this fantasy

of men having sex with other men is in one aspect liberating, allowing myself to embrace gay sex and gay identity.<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to race, as a Mexican-American, often in porn I see myself as the aggressive Latin Lover that dominates the archetypal slender white twink in gay porn.<sup>13</sup> The portrayal of the Latin Lover has been reified countless times through various media including gay and straight porn. A racialized sexuality explicitly highlights how Latin men are addressed often in these videos. Use of the word "Papi," for example, can frequently occur during hardcore sex in these pornographic scenes which offer the Latin performer a dominant role. Using Papi or Daddy positions the Latin performer as an authoritative/dominant figure similar to how the Bear physique operates. In a study conducted by The Journal for Sex Research, a selection of gay men, found explicitly on bareback sex-oriented sites, were asked questions on how they perceived sexual partners within and outside of their race. On the topic of expected sexual positioning as informed by stereotypes, the journal asked White men how they understood their sexual role with an individual outside of their race. The general response as found by the study was that "Many White men suggested that their role in sexual intercourse varied based on the race of their sexual partner. Men noted that they expected to be the receptive partner in interactions with Black and Latino male partners, whereas they expected to be the insertive partner in sexual encounters involving an Asian partner."<sup>14</sup> It is because of these daily

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<sup>12</sup> Sarah Schaschek. *Pornography and Seriality: The Culture of Producing Pleasure*. Place of Publication Not Identified, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 147

<sup>13</sup> Patrick A. Wilson, et al. "Race-Based Sexual Stereotyping and Sexual Partnering among Men Who Use the Internet to Identify Other Men for Bareback Sex." *The Journal of Sex Research* 46, no. 5 (2009): 412. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/stable/20620446>.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick A. Wilson, et al. "Race-Based Sexual Stereotyping and Sexual Partnering among Men Who Use the Internet to Identify Other Men for Bareback Sex." *The Journal of Sex Research* 46, no. 5 (2009): 407. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.libraries.smu.edu/stable/20620446>

assumptions placed on visually raced identities I find the opportunity to, and importance for, developing my image-based practice.

## CONCLUSION

My projects seek out ways to disrupt the connotations bodies possess as they become contextualized within gay media. Determining the idealized, homonormative representation as it sits in opposition to myself has been a meditative process of self-reflection and self-analysis. Through intervening with the photographic image first by way of collage, I had to define what it was that I truly desired. Identifying for myself what I wanted dictated what images I culled and reworked in my process. It is not only the physical body of the prototypical that I desire, but it is also the value offered to it. I want the privileges being the ideal holds amongst gay men which is the privilege to be desired without fear of inherent otherness. Becoming an active performer in my practice as it has manifested itself through video works have been a more aggressive strategy to demand to be seen and to relate to other marginalized peoples. As important as it is to engage existing representation of eurocentric beauty critically, it is equally important to generate work that places me at its center. It is similarly essential to me that the work that occurs as a result of my intellectual and artistic endeavors act as a bridge between myself and others for a more significant discourse surrounding identity in the gay community. Because establishing dialogue is my aim, it then becomes vital that my work appropriates and then remediates visual culture and re-enters that culture as an art object, as a commodity. Using found imagery whether it be the still or moving image provides my queer audience with a point of reference and entry point into potentially interrogating their relationships with the visual information that surrounds them daily.

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